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ABSTRACT

Interest among foreign students to attend universities in countries other than their own has been high for many decades. Until recently the emphasis has been on students from European cultures. This Eurocentrism focus in the United States affects non-European students. They find little familiarity and sometimes little acceptance of their cultures, customs, and languages. This paper discusses how American colleges and universities are attempting to serve international students so that they can be successful in meeting their educational goals. It also discusses how technology has an impact on student success for international students. Several cautions about over-reliance on technology are mentioned. Because of this over-reliance, international students may become too immersed in technology and limit their socialization with other students. The paper concludes that the role of technology can positively impact student success, but the role of advisors and other professional staff is still a critical factor in ensuring students' success. (JDM)

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STUDENT SUCCESS:
SERVING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AN AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Introduction

Interest among foreign students to attend universities in countries other than their own has been high for many decades. Until recently, however, the emphasis has been on students from European cultures, and the focus in the United States has been with an orientation that is overwhelmingly European. According to Johnston and Spalding (1996), more study abroad occurs in the United Kingdom alone than in the rest of Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America combined. Ninety to 95 percent of language enrollments are in French, German, and Spanish. As Johnston and Spalding (1996) stated, "The problem, obviously, is that this Eurocentrism makes less and less sense as the world changes, and non-European, non-Western peoples and cultures figure increasingly in all dimensions of our life".

One of the effects of this Eurocentrism focus in the United States is that when students who are not from European countries decide to matriculate to our institutions of higher education, they find little familiarity and sometimes little acceptance of their cultures, customs and languages. Yet, the interest and need for study opportunities in the United States remain at high levels in Japan, China and other Pacific Rim countries. According to Johnston and Spalding (1996), China, for example, is rebuilding its system of higher education, and while its population is 1.3 billion, its universities can serve only five percent of the age cohort that traditionally goes on to college.

Another noteworthy change in higher education in China is the recent interest in general and liberal education. In the past, China's form of general education followed a traditional Communist model, consisting mostly of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. With such an emphasis, no wonder it is somewhat confusing to students when they come to American colleges and universities and find that the majority of their work during their first two years is in fulfilling general education requirements rather than focusing on courses in their major fields of study.

This paper will discuss how American colleges and universities are attempting to serve International students so that they can be successful in meeting their educational goals. In addition, as we have moved into an age of technology, the question can be asked whether technology has an impact on student success for international students.

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Challenges, Needs and Adjustments of International Students

When international students first arrive at an American college or university, common emo range from excitement and wonder to feelings of fright and anxiety. These students often f lost with the new language, have concerns about meeting friends, or are worried that no on understand them or give them support. This experience has been described as a feeling of "jumping into cold water".

International students face many notable challenges during their first semester at an Americ institution of higher education. Papers need to be written. Abbreviations used in American higher education need to be understood. A reliable means of securing money from home nee to be established. Feelings of loneliness need to be dealt with in an appropriate manner. Mo international students experience a loss of what is familiar, and America is often not like wha they have seen in American movies. They often deal with feelings of culture shock and of the values being called into question.

In a 1988 educational film entitled, "Cold Water", three stages of adjustment for international students coming to America are identified. At first, the student believes that everything is fine (described as the honeymoon phase). Then the student experiences feelings of irritation -- food weather, and people are often found to be unpleasant. At the last stage, the student adjusts to realize that there are things to be liked and adjustments can be made, and there are other things for which an adjustment will never be made. This stage leads to an acceptance of differences where there may be occasional strain but not anxiety, and the student begins to enjoy the new culture.

It has been found that what is most helpful during this transition is for foreign students to get together and discuss their experiences not fitting in with their values. Those who deny that there are any adjustments or unhappiness are usually the ones who have the most difficult time. A difficult adjustment for many foreign students, particularly students from Eastern Asian cultures, is that Americans are perceived to be critical, blunt and even rude at times. Their openness and directness can even be embarrassing to the foreign student who is not used to the American way of sharing personal information. In addition, time management is not part of many other cultures which do not place the same value on promptness as Americans do; in fact, being on time may even be perceived as being rude. These students are also often amazed at the lack of geographic knowledge that American students have in relation to their areas of the world.

Another key adjustment factor for many foreign students is the difference in language patterns. Use of phrases such as "Hi, how are you?" are common, but with no expectation for an answer to the question. In fact, this greeting seems superficial to the foreign student. Another example includes "I'll call you" with no call coming after all. In addition, American students can experience difficulty trying to understand a foreign student's accent with the student often being asked to repeat what is being said three or four times.

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Foreign students view many American friendships as relationships with little depth, whereas their conception of friendship is very different. To the foreign student, deep and lasting friendships among Americans appear rare.

Finally, American students seem to have little respect for professors and other authority figures as compared to foreign students who rarely question authority, and who would never engage in disruptive classroom behavior such as putting their feet on their desks, drinking or eating, or interrupting the professor. In fact, many students from Asian cultures have an expectation from their educational systems that students should not speak in class and should memorize what they have been taught. This leads them to often be reluctant to engage in class discussions.

In looking at psychosocial differences between American and Asian foreign freshmen students, Sheehan and Pearson (1995) conducted a study to see whether Chickering's theory on the identity process of college students was applicable to Asian students. It was believed that if this theory was relevant with Asian students, it could be useful for understanding them and designing developmentally appropriate programs. The study used the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI) to measure certain aspects of Chickering's theory.

Sheehan and Pearson (1995) found that Asian international freshmen were similar to American students and were no less autonomous regarding their academics. Gender differences were not found between either group of students. The study did find that Asian international freshmen differed significantly from the American freshmen in the areas of Establishing and Clarifying Purpose, Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, and Intimacy. This suggested that Asian students were not as actively involved in academic life, had less well defined educational and career goals, and had more difficulty manipulating their environment to satisfy needs and responsibilities than did American students. Asian students showed lower measurements on the development of open and trusting interpersonal relationships if their interactions with American students were limited because of their isolation and seeking support only from other international students. Lower scores on the intimacy scale fit with the Asian culture which does not encourage the development of intimate relationships, especially at the age range of typical college freshmen.

It is important to remember that the SDTLI is a measure of development based on Western values. Thus, a limitation of Sheehan and Pearson's study is that its findings can only be used to provide insight into how Asian international students compare to American students on the specific tasks and scales of the SDTLI.

Programs and Services for International Students

With the above-stated challenges, needs and adjustments in mind, what are some of the programs and services that can be provided by American colleges and universities to maximize the educational experience for international students?

It is important to recognize the value of family in the lives of many international students, and Asian students in particular. For example, family is central to Chinese society and traditions

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play an important role in everyday life. This is in striking contrast to the Western notion of individuality. Also, a lack of privacy, by Western standards, dominates the residential and w environment of the student in their native country. Individual self expression is often hindere housing is very crowded and many family members often share residential space. However, also evident that interpersonal harmony prevails and one does not often witness an argument fight.

The programs and services of American colleges and universities must, therefore, take into account the closely-held values of international students so that they have a sense of familiarit and comfort. For example, events for international students should include family members w may be living with those students as is often the case with graduate students.

Numerous colleges and universities throughout the United States have, in fact, established programs and services. These programs provide the much needed support for the internationa student to enhance both the successful transition to an American institution and completion of the student's college goals. These programs can be categorized as follows:

* Orientation and Arrival Services -- Visa services; immigration regulations and federal laws; temporary housing information; programs on cultural and academic adjustment; airport arrival greetings; information on obtaining a driver's license; etc. These services have the objective of making a smooth transition from the home country to the university and providing needed information for the arrival of the student.

* Life in the University -- Health insurance and health care resources; shopping opportunities within the community; international student organization contacts; English classes at the university or within the community; telephone services; bus systems; recreation and leisure activities; banking; emergency services; local travel opportunities; etc. These are the services needed to help students get settled in their new environment and to become acquainted with offerings at the university and within the immediate community.

* Financial Aid and Employment -- Fellowships and other financial resources for international graduate and undergraduate students; practical training information such as getting a job on campus; job search strategies; employment options for F-1 students; etc. Financial resources are often high on the list of needs for students once they arrive and employment services are needed to help the student navigate between the regulations and employer expectations.

* Community Involvement with International Students -- Host family programs; conversation partner programs to give students a chance to speak English with an American friend; English conversation groups; and speakers' bureau to provide international speakers to schools, civic, and religious organizations.

* Social and Cultural Activities and Opportunities -- international clubs and organizations; cross-cultural lectures and exhibits; international week activities; festivals and Chinese New Year celebrations; monthly newsletters to provide updates on activities and news

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from campus; cross-cultural resource libraries; bus tours during vacation breaks; holiday activities; workshops; and international film series.

* Departure Information -- Moving and shipping information and other things to consider when going home. Re-entry workshops can assist a student to realize that changes have taken place while the student has been in America and that those changes might affect their re-entry into their home culture.

It is also important to note NAFSA: Association of International Educators, a nonprofit membership association that provides training, information, and other services to professionals in the field of international educational exchange and specialized programs for international students. Another program of NAFSA is ASPIRE, an acronym for APEC Student Professional Integration and Reentry. ASPIRE helps to facilitate the personal and professional return home of Asia-Pacific graduate and postgraduate students. Benefits to students include career-related contacts, job fairs, internship and practical training opportunities, and information on Asia-Pacific economic developments; personal skill-development workshops and leadership training; a newsletter, electronic mail, and job-link database.

Role of Technology

Prospective and enrolled college students are becoming more proficient at using the Internet to explore educational options at home and abroad. College and university officials have quickly learned that this medium has the power to capture the interest of prospective students. Having information about the college on the WorldWide Web has provided students with a plethora of material far beyond what most recruitment materials ever provided. Through the process of "surfing the Internet", students have access to a vast array of information -- textual, graphic, and audio. An institution's catalog, available courses, major requirements, faculty listings, student services, and general rules can be accessed immediately. Numerous photographs that offer flattering vignettes of campus life, as well as interactive maps, can be accessed at the mere click of a computer's mouse.

Another technological advancement has been through the use of electronic mail (e-mail). Students can send a message to the Admissions Office and get a humanized answer to any question regarding the college and university. Once a student has made a decision to apply, he/she can do so by filling out an application on the computer and sending it electronically.

Students also find that they often have access to all these features once they are enrolled by bringing their personal computers from home and hooking up to a student account made accessible through wiring of their residence hall. This also opens the door to the availability of listservs and communication back home and with other students from their country who may be at other institutions. This connection with home could help alleviate some of the problems mentioned in the first section of this paper such as loneliness and homesickness.

It has also been found that some students who are reluctant to speak up in class may feel more comfortable participating with the instructor by e-mail or through computer conferencing

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systems. This may particularly be true in the case of an international student whose language skills may impede class discussion.

A caution for administrators and staff, however, lies in the possibility of students becoming so immersed in the technology and the comfort zone with their technology that they do not socialize with other students and participate in campus activities. Isolation from the campus can be a reality and residence hall directors and advisors need to help the student find a balance between these activities.

A second caution is the potential for ethical issues to arise through the Web pages. Anyone with access to Internet and the WorldWide Web can post information for the world to see. There is little verification of the accuracy of the posted information, and safeguards have not been put into place to make sure that students are not duped into applying or sending money to an institution that exaggerates its virtues or even one that might exist only in cyberspace. The importance of professional staff should not be overestimated, as these staff members can serve as mentors and advisors to assist students when they navigate this new technology.

Finally, it must be realized that caution should be used in the transmission of sensitive data via e-mail. The issue of security must still be considered when transmitting items such as a university application form which might include giving financial information and credit card or social security numbers via cyberspace.

The role of technology, then, can impact student success by providing opportunities for students to be served more effectively, efficiently and timely. Access to programs and service information can be enhanced greatly. Communication can be enhanced both on and off campus. Cautions, however, need to be taken with this new advanced opportunity, and the role of advisors and other professional staff is still a critical factor in ensuring each student's success.

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